

Life, literature and a longing for home



Diary



Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

HAVE YOU ever had the sensation of being in two places at the same time? Tomorrow for instance I am returning to England from New England after five months of teaching literature and politics for the English and Comparative Literature Departments at Yale University in New Haven, not too far from New London.

The colleges are a replica of Oxford, down to the colour of the stones. They were built during the Depression by imported Italian architects, with faces mocking at scholarship.

The first student was a Jacob Hemingway, enrolled in March 1702, paving the way for a long line of others who would be instructed in the Arts and Sciences and "fitted for public Employment both in Church and Civil State". Until the Sixties and Seventies this long line hardly included Blacks and women. Today it is co-educational and multiracial, although Blacks

good students and its graduates readily find employment in all sorts of places and positions. One of its law graduates has even found his way to the highest position in Civil State. His name is George Bush, and he has employed another Yalian, D. Alan Bromley, as his national adviser in the sciences and technology.

WRITERS are supposed to have an opinion on everything from geography, history, physics and chemistry to the fate of humankind. Recently I attended a workshop in Stockholm on Development Assistance for the 90s. I gave a paper on The Impact of Donors and Development Assistance on the Recipient Cultures.

I joined the other Africans present in taking a position which was different from that of the expert from the World Bank who kept on citing Kenya, Malawi, Cameroon, and Ivory Coast — all repressive, all subservient to the West — as the success stories of IMF Africa.

These were experts on micro and macroeconomics who had drawn complicated graphs and figures and quoted statistics, and were supposed to understand each other's languages.

When later during a boatride in the Stockholm waters I met Per PEN, I suddenly realised how glad I was simply to talk shop with another writer.

Wästberg is the author of Eldens Skugga (The Shadows of Fire) and Bergets Kalla (Source of the Mountain), and numerous other articles and books on Africa. As the boat moved towards the centre of Stockholm he talked about the places of his childhood which were also the landscape of a number of his novels set in Stockholm.

at Stockholm opera. Many people have drawn parallels between his murder and that of Olof Palme. And there he suddenly stopped, obviously reliving the pain and other memories for a person who was not only his country's loved premier but also a personal and family friend.

What was emerging was Wästberg's love of the physical and social landscape of his upbringing as a citizen and as a writer, and I felt slightly overwhelmed by a sense of my own exile from Kenya.

FOR THE last six years I have lived in Islington, and this self-contained urban village near the heart of London has become a kind of second home. My novel, Matigari, was written in Gikuyu at 85c Noel Road which makes me identify with Islington all the more. When I was invited to Yale last year I hesitated.

Would this not drive me even farther away from Kenya and Africa? So as soon as I landed in New Haven in mid-January, I threw myself into writing a filmscript, Karuiku, for a project involving filmmakers from Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Mozambique, Zambia and Sweden.

Writing has always been my way of reconnecting myself to the landscape of my birth and upbringing.

I was back in Africa of the Twenties and Thirties. I lived its landscape, its rivers, its history and only after this imaginative return did I wake up to where I was — New Haven, Connecticut.

I was living in the Taft apartments on College street facing Bishop Tutu's corner. Bishop Tutu in Yale? In fact the South Africa issue is all around Yale. My students talk about it. And outside the offices of the President of Yale are

constant reminder that Yale should divest itself of interests in South Africa.

Yale has one of the best libraries in the United States. I one day walk through the corridors of its silence. I tiptoe to the section which I have been told contains nearly all the newspapers in the world. I go for the Kenya newspapers which I have not seen for a long time.

It was early March. And what do I see staring at me from the pages of the newspaper? President Moi of Kenya at a public meeting denouncing me and claiming that I was in Sudan, obviously plotting against him. Well talk of being in two places at the same time. I have never been to Sudan.

I SHOULD not have worried about being very far from Kenya. On arrival in New Haven, one of the earliest internal letters I get is from the director of the programme of African Languages at Yale written in perfect Gikuyu. She is an American.

Swahili, Yoruba, Hausa and Zulu are taught at Yale and this summer they are introducing Gikuyu and Shona. The programme has quantities of teaching material and books in Gikuyu and Kiswahili. One of the 24 graduate students in my seminar on literature and politics has studied Kiswahili, Gikuyu, Hausa, on top of her knowledge of European languages.

She is one among the 10 students admitted every year into the graduate programme of the comparative literature department from more than 100 applicants. When I had dinner with one of the editors of the prestigious Yale Journal of Criticism I tried to get out of her request that I contribute an article by telling her that I only wrote in Gikuyu. She looked me in the eye and said: write in Gikuyu. We shall publish it.

I have enjoyed being in the classroom again after more than six

The students with their passionate debates, quarrels, shoutings, and arguments make me feel at home, and I begin looking forward to every seminar. But of course I am daily struck by the absurdity of the situation. In my own country I was banned from teaching at the university, or in any school.

The kind of issues we are raising in the classrooms of Yale would land all of us in prison for anything between one and ten years. I tell the students this, and they look

We are only looking at the relevance of fiction to the facts of life!

EVERY TIME I give a public reading from the English translation of my novel, Matigari, I am in two minds about telling the story behind its being banned in Kenya in its Gikuyu original. But the story does illustrate the absurdity of a writer's situation in a repressive state. The novel was first published in Kenya in October 1986. Soon after, reports reached President Moi that peasants in Central Kenya were talking about a man called Matigari who was going round the country demanding truth and justice. Moi ordered the man's immediate arrest.

The police reported that Matigari was only a character in a book. Still in February 1987 Matigari was "arrested" and removed from all the bookshops in Nairobi and from the publisher's warehouse. Which reminds me that my previous novel in Gikuyu, Devil On The Cross, had met a similar fate at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison in 1978. But that was only written on toilet paper and it was later returned to me as harmless. Well, Matigari seems to be made of sterner stuff.

AWRITER inhabits two places at the same time: the land of facts and that of fiction. But in a neocolonial situation fiction seems to be more real than the absurdity of the factual world of a dictator. The world of a dictator has an element of pure fantasy. He will kill, jail, and drive hundreds into exile and imagine that he is actually loved for it.

One of course wishes that the world of a dictator was only confined to hardcovers. But it isn't and a dictator will even think of dragging characters from fiction into the streets. Perhaps that proves the relevance of literature to life. Or put it this way: dictators are the best students of literature. Or that they have learned anything from either literature or history.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has lived in exile from his native Kenya since mid-1982. He was held in detention without trial in Kenya throughout 1978 after a performance of his play, I Will Marry When I Want, in his home village of Limuru. Its theme was that those who had fought hardest for independence had gained least, a theme to which he returns in his new novel, Matigari.